

If Shortgrass Kids Have A Fault It's Going Home Too Early At Night

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MERTZON — People throughout the entire country have been worrying themselves silly over the nation's young people. Mrs. Johnson has thrown so many teas for concerned women's groups, it's a wonder her staff can keep a clean teacup in the White House cupboard. Hollywood actresses have been so preoccupied with their obligation, it's a mystery how the divorce rate has remained static on the West Coast. Huge conclaves of ministers and politicians have raised an awful fuss; editors and sociologists, supported by doctors and youth workers, have written thousands of words on the faults of the younger generation.

To get in step with this crusade, I've been checking on kids in the Shortgrass Country. For the past two months, the C.I.A. couldn't have fielded a more dedicated snooper than myself. Not a place bearing the tell-tale sign of a tennis shoe track has been left unobserved. To gather the facts, I've suffered every type of hardship, from staying on the streets until such ungodly hours as 7:30 p.m. to eavesdropping on teenage conversations.

The findings at this date are skimpy. A combination of Sherlock Holmes and James Bond couldn't hot-trail this pack of youngsters. For one thing, unlike any kids since the settling of the Nile Valley, they don't prowl at night.

For example, in the course of the work I made several late-hour surveys of the whole Mertzton township. From dusk until an 8 p.m. showing of some marvelous TV re-run, I kept constant vigil on the parks and other spots most likely to attract teenagers. There wasn't a sign of an unruly pot-smoking party or a wild beer-drinking orgy. A poet specializing in country church themes couldn't have fouled the tranquillity of the night. The only people stirring were a few weary husbands coming back from the grocery store.

Now, you know good and well these are the hours when young bucks prowl. If they have the slightest instinct to roam, they do it under cover of darkness. Furthermore, the young scamps are going to circulate while the elders are at home; they aren't going to risk having some grey-bearded patriarch blow the whistle every time they get the urge to sow some wild oats.

For six or seven nights I cruised around town. If the kids had been up to any mischief, I'd have caught them in the act. I did notice, one night as I was putting out the cat, that traffic was increasing on the road by my house. But that was probably only the 9 o'clock bridge party breaking up. Those high-stepping card players never do get home at a decent hour. It isn't unusual for them to stay up until after 10.

Morning snooping produced the same results. I nearly wore out a stool in the local coffee house, waiting for someone under 20 years old to come by. I can't say where the kids are the rest of the day, as I have to get to the ranch, but they sure are scarce from 5 to 7 a.m.

Other methods of surveillance proved equally fruitless. Wire tapping, for instance, was found to be out of the question. Listening to a third of the youngsters' telephone conversations would give a man a cauliflower ear that would stand out at an old boxers' reunion. Bugging their rooms was impossible, not to mention the din of high fidelity radios mixed with the din of super-decibel record players.

Frankly, what I did hear, I didn't understand. The head interpreter at the U.N. would have a hard time figuring out how, for example, a basketball player and a tamale supper could both be described as "real cool." Or how an English teacher and a young preacher could both be "real groovy."

To continue this investigation seems kind of foolish. All the facts indicate that our teenagers are staying home too much. A provincial reporter has a fat chance of convincing the big league worriers that kids here roam excessively. Not even George Romney would buy that idea.

One thing for sure: these young people had better get on the move. Before they know it, it'll be their time to criticize a younger generation.